

Retired troops fill need in Arizona's classrooms

By CAROLYN DRYER
THE GLENDALE STAR

One is a retired Air Force technical sergeant who teaches industrial technology and coaches the girls volleyball team at Kellis High School in Peoria Unified School District. Another one is a retired Marine Corps staff sergeant, who just completed the school year teaching math at Landmark Middle School in Glendale.

Both reached this point in their careers by transitioning from military service to teaching by way of the Troops to Teachers (TTT) program. TTT is administered locally through the Arizona Department of Veterans Services. It helps eligible military personnel with referral assistance and placement services.

Arizona ranks eighth in the country for placing troops in the classroom. John Scheuer, program manager for TTT Arizona, should know. He is a TTT alumnus himself, starting in 2000 with classroom

teaching seventh- and eighth-graders in the Dysart School District.

Scheuer left the Navy after 10 years, then graduated from Arizona State University with tuition help from the G.I. Bill. At Dysart, Scheuer, a historian, taught social studies and math.

He said, "The traits and values the veteran brings are directly transferable to what they can do in the classroom. We call it an 'added value.'"

Commitment is also part of the "value" added to the military-to-classroom equation. Scheuer said 50 percent of the average traditionally trained teachers leave the school system after five years. In contrast, 80 percent of TTT teachers remain after five years.

Not every person who leaves the military is eligible. They must have six years of active duty under their belt. But that does not mean they must wait until their service time is completed; they can begin the transition before they

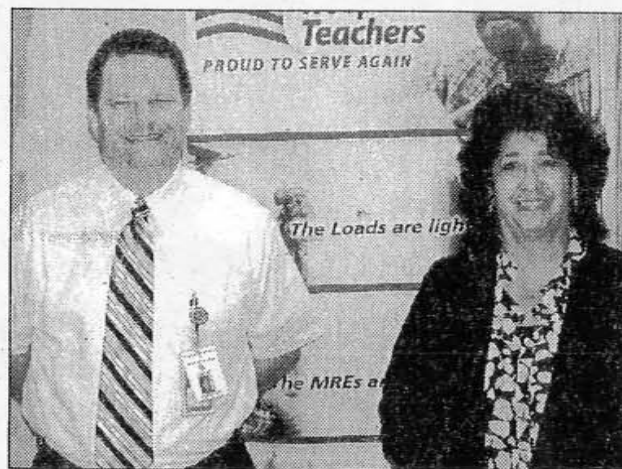


Photo by Carolyn Dryer

John Scheuer, left, program manager for Troops To Teachers Arizona, and his assistant, Josephine Luna, stand ready to help troops transition to teaching.

leave. If they take classes while on active duty, they get tuition help and do not have to use the G.I. Bill. This gives the TTT coordinators time to look over their transcripts and guide them toward college courses that will enhance their certification qualifications.

"Depending on what they bring to the table, we help identify routes best for them," Scheuer said. "If they don't have their bachelor's (degree), it limits what they can teach."

Those without the four-

year degree are eligible to instruct in health, industrial tech, family consumer science, business and marketing and agriculture.

"And we still work with those veterans to help them get their bachelor's," Scheuer said, so they can teach math or fifth grade, wherever their interest and talents take them.

A three-tier system screens potential teachers, Scheuer said.

Why teach? Can you teach? How do you get there?

"It's that third phase

where our office comes into play," Scheuer said. "That's the bulk of what we do."

TTT has teachers placed all over Arizona – Globe, Payson, San Carlos. Thirteen TTT teachers are in classrooms on the Navajo Nation.

"We have two purposes," Scheuer said. "One, assist in transition to teaching; and two, assist high-needs schools and districts."

There are approximately 400 TTT teachers in Arizona classrooms this year, he said. But that does not begin to meet the need.

Scheuer said, "The state actually needs 4,800 per year."

That is the number of average annual openings that will be required each year from 2008 to 2014, according to the Arizona Department of Commerce, Scheuer said.

The average salary for a first-year teacher in Maricopa County is in the mid-\$30,000 range.

TTT offers financial

assistance - \$10,000 over the first three years - to teachers in high-needs schools.

Mark Adams retired in 1998 as an Air Force technical sergeant. When he retired, he had a master's degree in education from Northern Arizona University. While he was teaching the leadership school at Luke Air Force Base, he was also teaching at Rio Salado. He moved from teaching at Rio Salado to adjunct instructing for NAU.

Then, he went to a briefing at Luke, "and people said, 'This is what you need to do,'" Adams said.

He got his paperwork together, obtained certification through TTT, then applied for a teaching job in Peoria Unified School District. He applied on Wednesday, got a call Thursday for an interview, and by Friday, he was hired at Kellis High School. He teaches industrial tech (drafting and design, woodworking,

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building trades, business tech, and next year, a pre-engineering program).

"Almost everything I was trained for in the military has come into use here," Adams said. "I teach four different classes, none of them related to each other."

From the beginning, Adams was told the school needed his help. He was allowed to teach both sides – industrial tech and business marketing – because he was certified in both.

"It made it easier for Kellis administrators," Adams said. "They didn't have to hire somebody certified in one or the other, but one in both."

Adams has nothing but accolades for the help he received from TTT.

"Anytime I needed something, they were there," he said. "I never had to wait in line. Constant e-mails. It's a wonderful program. More people should do it."

After 15 years of active duty, Tom Russell received a medical discharge from the Marines in 2000. He was a staff sergeant with

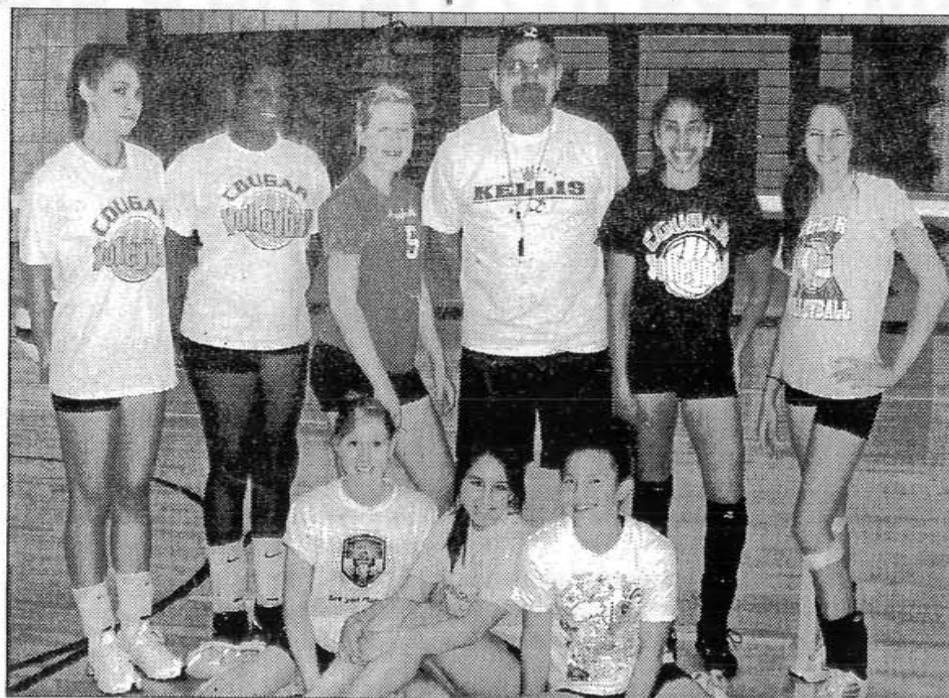


Photo by Carolyn Dryer

Teacher and coach Mark Adams poses with Kellis High School volleyball players, left to right: sitting, Lindsey Wemhoner, Victoria Constable and Brooke Alonzo; standing, Christina Whitaker, Kourtney Ward, Nicole Parker, Adams, Brooke Razo and Mackenzie Crowell.

central vision problems. Just last year, he passed a state drivers test using the latest optical technology. He wears Ocutechs, special driving glasses with a built-in scope in the lens, when he drives.

In his Marine life, he was a drill instructor. At home and weekends and some weeknights, he is a pastor at Grace Temple

Church in Phoenix. This last year, he was Mr. Russell, a math teacher at Landmark Middle School. It is considered a school with high-risk students, those who need that extra help Russell believes he brings to the table.

A product of Cartwright Elementary School and Frank Borman Middle School, Russell attended

Phoenix Christian and Greenway high schools before settling down and graduating from McClintock High School as a three-sport athlete and the school's first black student body president. Because, he said, "I wanted the ultimate challenge," Russell joined the Marines. He became a drill instructor, but eventually had to take his

medical retirement. Soon after, he had his bachelor's and master's through University of Phoenix and a transition program through TTT.

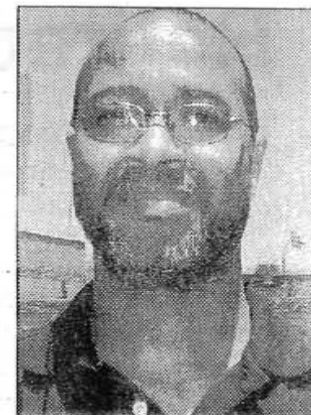
He found his niche in his first classroom in the Phoenix Union High School District, "because they typically don't have black teachers," he said. "Plus, I could say things normal teachers can't say. I never had problems. I respect them, they respect me."

He brought the same level of trust and respect to Landmark students, many of whom have no parents, or are the parent role, or are living in group homes.

In his time away from the classroom, Russell helps with TeamAZ, a high-school age basketball team, one he calls "the top team in Arizona."

Russell said the TTT program, "is almost like you really don't have to pound the pavement. Because you're a TTT, a lot of (school) districts are willing to work with us. Teaching school is tough."

Russell's position at



Teacher Tom Russell enjoys teaching high-risk students and coaching basketball.

Landmark was cut as of May 30. He is interested in teaching elsewhere. He likes the middle school environment, and he likes to coach basketball. School districts interested in hiring Russell can reach him through the TTT program at 602-372-4268.

Upcoming seminar

Maricopa Workforce Connections will host a Troops to Teachers information seminar for veterans 10 a.m. to noon July 20 at Maricopa Workforce Connection, 1840 N. 95th Ave., Suite 160. One-on-one sessions will be held 12:30 to 4 p.m. Call 1-800-830-2134 to RSVP, or e-mail jluna@azdvs.gov.